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Securing our Future Cities

Abigail Page reviews the AGI’s Geo:The Big 5 Future Cities Security event ... one that succeeded in putting the citizen, as well as technology, at its core

Almost half of all humans now live in cities. By 2050 this will be between 65-75% of us. Worldwide, the urban population is growing by the equivalent of the population of Birmingham a week. The population of London is growing by one full tube train every 3 days.

These statistics were presented by keynote speaker and former MP Dan Byles (Living PlantIT), at the AGI Geo:The Big 5 Future Cities Security event in London on 9 July. They certainly grabbed delegates’ attention as he proceeded to paint a picture of the enormous challenge facing us all.

Reaching out

In keeping with the high quality content for which AGI events are noted, chair Doug Specht (University of Westminster) structured presentations that reached well beyond geographic information professionals to demonstrate the potential arising from the future development of our urban places. This particular event was also staged in a workshop-style atmosphere ... one that facilitated deep debate on many of the issues aired in the presentations.

Urban living has many intrinsic challenges – demonstrated on the day by disruption caused by a tube strike! That aside, many speakers encouraged delegates to recognise the opportunities of using the connectedness of the city and disruptive technologies to bring vital improvements to our city infrastructure. This ranged from the need for a virtual infrastructure to match the physical (Timo Tuukkanen, Bentley), through subsurface interactions (Stephanie Bricker, BGS) to green infrastructure (Gary Grant, independent consultant).

Citizen focus

Of particular interest to me were recurring references to the citizen and to the social aspects of urban design. Not always at the forefront of technology-focussed events, the programme gave scope to look at these aspects. While Dan Byles and others discussed how those running our cities use technology to understand the citizen and develop efficient and resilient services, others spoke of the importance of a bottom-up approach.

Liane Hartley (Urbanistas UK) made the case that the role of the community as the “client and commissioner” in the Future City was vital but often missed. Dr Wallis Motta (London School of Economics) described work to explore differences between asset perceptions using digital connectivity within multi-cultural London. A deep debate



then ensued on the need to consider not only the physical side of geography in our work, but also social geography. This focussed on the need to provide the tools with which to engage positively (sometimes “by stealth”!).

The feedback from attendees indicated that they took home several questions to ponder. These will continue to feed and stimulate discussion and be evident in the forthcoming AGI Foresight Report.

As the Big 5 series now heads towards its finale - the AGI Annual Conference in Warwickshire - key points from the debates will help us answer two key questions: What does geographic information have to offer our “Resilient Futures”?, and what are the opportunities for which we should be reaching?

The presentations and audio from this event are available to all members through the AGI website at www.agi.org.uk



AGI Annual Conference 2015

This year’s key conference for the UK geospatial community – the AGI Annual Conference, GeoCom: Resilient Futures - will be held at Chesford Grange in Warwickshire, 23 - 25 November. Connecting technical sessions with wider opportunities, the event will bring together leading industry figures to address Geo:The Big 5 topics. Further details can be found at www.geobig5.com

